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Congress Founds the Navy, 1787-1798

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Smelser, Marshall. *Congress Founds the Navy, 1787-1798.* Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1959. 229 p.

Congress Founds the Navy, 1787-1798, is an interesting, readable and remarkably documented record of a little-known era in U. S. Navy history. Naval historians have usually given slight attention to the political shaping of national naval policy, and political historians have generally presented only the final decisions in naval policy without much investigation of the policy-making process. These approaches to the study of American naval history have resulted in a good deal of apolitical narrative writing with emphasis on strategy, operations, technology, heroism, but with very little on what the nation expected of a navy and how the judgments on its mission were arrived at. The U. S. Navy was not founded by sailors but by politicians. The story of its founding is intimately connected with highly partisan politics. Decisions on naval strategic principles were reached by the same processes as decisions on tariffs, public lands, Indian problems, banking, the national debt or any other problem which engaged the public interest; the fountain of naval policy sprang from the Congress. The struggle between the Federalists and anti-Federalists over forming a navy was tied in with the need to ratify the Constitution, which in turn would give the power and resources required to form an effective navy. The opponents, of course, claimed that a navy would merely invite trouble from stronger nations. Throughout is an extremely interesting view of the national political scene and the gradual transition of American concern from internal (Indian) problems to a defensive coastal force to an offensive navy. Internationally the developments on the fringe of limited war with both France and England while each was at war with the other have a remarkably modern ring. Mr. Smelser's history contains much information which can be found in no other text. As an authoritative (almost 1000 footnotes in less than 200 pages of text) historical source, it is a near essential addition to a naval library.